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Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

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Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Consideration of reports submitted by States Parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination against Women

Combined second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports of States Parties

Gabon*

* The present document is being issued without formal editing. For the initial report by the Government of Gabon, see CEDAW/C/5/Add.54, considered by the Committee at its eighth session.

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Introduction

Following the initial report of 14 June 1988, which was considered by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women at its 134th meeting, of 21 February 1989 (CEDAW C/SR/134), Gabon is pleased to submit its combined second, third, fourth and fifth periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The present report comprises:

- A description of the country's overall situation, including its policy to promote equality between men and women;
- An account of the progress achieved and the difficulties encountered in implementing each article of the Convention;
- Concluding comments.

I. Overall situation

Located on the Gulf of Guinea, astride the Equator, Gabon has a total surface area of 267,667 km^2. It is bordered to the north by Cameroon, to the northwest by Equatorial Guinea, to the east and south by the Republic of Congo, and to the west by the Atlantic Ocean.

Gabon has a small population, of 1,200,000. Despite the many sociocultural constraints involved, the country does recognize the importance of women, who account for 52 per cent of its population.

It is for this reason that on 22 July 1982 Gabon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which entered into force on 21 January 1983.

Since ratifying the Convention, Gabon has introduced a number of measures with a view to its implementation:

Legal measures

- Addition to the Constitution of the principle of the equality of all citizens, regardless of their gender (1990);
- Repeal, the same year, of Ordinance No. 64/69 of 4 October 1969 forbidding the use of contraceptives, and recognition of the right to contraception under the 1990 National Charter of Freedoms;
- Study entitled "Social and legal aspects of the status of Gabonese women," which highlighted a number of provisions that discriminated against women;
- Adoption of Act No. 1/2000 of 18 August 2000, setting out measures to protect the health and social rights of women, mothers and children, thereby repealing the aforementioned Ordinance No. 64/69;
- Adoption of Act No. 87/98 of 20 July 1999, on the Nationality Code, which furthered the interests of women and children.

Social measures

- Gradual institutionalization of the gender approach;
- Emergence of associations and non-governmental organizations for the defence of women's rights;
- Creation, by the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), of the Observatory for Human Rights and Equality (ODEFPA), which is responsible for protecting the rights of women, families and children, and for bringing discriminatory provisions into line with the spirit of the Constitution;
- Creation of the Office for the Coordination of Non-governmental Organizations and Women's Associations (CORFEM), as a partner of the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women.

Political measures

- Act No. 24/96 of 6 June 1996 on Political Parties, which makes no distinction between men and women regarding participation in public life;
- Similarly, Act No.7/96 on Political Elections, which makes no distinction between men and women in this regard.

Economic measures

The Government has initiated a number of projects to provide women with access to credit, notably:

- Promo Gabon;
- Fonds d'Aide and de Garantie (FAGA);
- Entreprendre au Gabon;
- The Gabonese Enterprise Network, which oversees the work of economic development agencies;
- Fonds d'expansion economic (FODEX).

Moreover, in an effort to overcome the problems they encounter in the banking sector, women themselves have created a community-based financial movement, consisting of annuity funds and village savings banks.

However, these various measures sometimes come up against social and cultural constraints that present major obstacles to their implementation.

II. Progress achieved and difficulties encountered in implementing the Convention

Article 1
Definition of discrimination against women

Although the Republic of Gabon concurs with the provisions of the first article of the Convention, defining the term **discrimination**, it has elected not to add the article to its Constitution, preferring instead to translate into concrete action the

principle of equality between men and women, which is already enshrined in its basic law in accordance with the spirit of the Convention.

Article 2
Elimination of discrimination

Aided by its adherence to international instruments such as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and the African Charter of Human and People's Rights ("Banjui Charter") (1981), the Republic of Gabon endeavours to ensure that its national legislation is brought into line with the spirit of the Convention, as well as to ensure strict application of the principle of equality enshrined in its Constitution.

The following are examples in this context:

- In the legal sphere, women are entitled to raise an exception of unconstitutionality, before any jurisdiction, when faced with a law or an act which does not recognize their fundamental rights (article 86 of the Constitution). In such cases, judges must refer the case to the Constitutional Court, which must first give its opinion.

In general terms, the legal system strives to apply prevailing legislation without discriminating.

Appeals procedures are the same for both sexes. Women may appeal against any legal decision when they believe themselves to have been harmed.

Since 1996 Gabon has carried out a number of studies on the discriminatory impact of its legislation, including the following:

- "Women's rights: suggestions for bringing the Civil Code into line with the Constitution" (Association of Gabonese Women Lawyers and the United States Embassy in Gabon);
- "Social and legal aspects of the status of Gabonese women" (Joint study by the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, and the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA);
- "Women and decision-making" (Joint survey by the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, and UNDP.

- A number of administrative mechanisms have also been set up:

Women may appeal to the Public Commissioner (currently a woman), who is responsible for settling any disputes that may arise between the different social organizations. The Commissioner may also appeal to the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, which has set up a special complaints and advisory unit for this purpose.

There is also a consultation process, administered by the National Commission for the Family and the Advancement of Women (CNFPF), one of whose main objectives is to initiate, provide follow-up to, and assess the orientations of Government actions on behalf of family and women.

The Commission also monitors the application and follow-up of the recommendations and decisions of seminars, symposiums and conferences held at the national and international levels for the advancement of the family and of

women (Decree No. 000298/PR/MFPF on the creation, powers, organization and functioning of the National Commission for the Family and the Advancement of Women, section 1, article 3).

The Government machinery set up in 1983 to promote the advancement of women, the Department for Women's Issues (Decree No. 1666/PR of 2 December 1983, on the powers and organization of the Department for Women's Issues), has gradually gained in stature, becoming, in February 1999, the Ministry for the Family and the Advancement of Women and, in January 2002, the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women.

The Ministry organizes a number of forums, seminars and workshops to sensitize and educate women from all sectors of society about their social rights and obligations, in an effort to combat certain traditional behaviours that hinder women's development.

Despite the efforts of the Government and organizations of civil society, there are several areas in which women continue to suffer discrimination, both in the law and in daily life.

One example of this is the fact that, although article 270 of the Penal Code penalizes bigamy by the husband and the wife, and article 178, paragraph 2 allows either party to take another spouse during marriage, in practice, only the man may do so. Wives therefore have little option but to accept their husband's decision, if they wish to avoid being abandoned or divorced by them.

Another example is article 692 of the Penal Code, which provides that a widow shall be deprived of her right of usufruct if she remarries, without compelling grounds, into a family other than that of her deceased spouse.

- With respect to employment, article 1, paragraph 7 of the Constitution states that "each citizen has the right to work and the right to obtain employment. No one can be impaired in his work by reason of his origins, his sex, his race, his opinions".

  Act No. 3/94 of 21 November 1994 on the Labour Code provides, in its articles 1 and 9, that all workers (including disabled persons) are equal before the law and enjoy the same protection and guarantees. All discrimination with respect to employment and working conditions is prohibited, particularly if based on race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, nationality or social origins.

The same is true with respect to the general statutes of the civil service and the general statutes of civil servants.

- Land laws make no distinction between men and women with respect to obtaining land for building purposes (for example, Decree No. 80/PR/MHUL of 2 February 1989, regulating building permits, sets the same conditions for men and women).
- Safeguarding the health of mothers and children is among the Government's top priorities (Plan of Action in Social and Health Matters, Act No. 001/2000, concerning certain measures for the social and health protection of women, mothers and children).

- School is mandatory for all children between the ages of 6 and 16, regardless of sex.

Article 3
Full development and progress of women

The Government is making every effort to ensure that women enjoy the fundamental rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution. Today, women participate fully in the process of helping the nation to develop on a sustainable basis.

Women are present in virtually all sectors of activity (Government, civil service, National Assembly, Senate ...). However, there are not enough women in certain decision-making positions (for example, only 5 out of 39 Government members are women).

Women are offered training opportunities on the same basis as men. They have access to all social services, health care, medical care, education, literacy programmes, property, etc.

In an effort to address the various legal and psychological obstacles, several measures have been taken:

- With respect to legislation, military laws that discriminated against women regarding access to certain ranks (particularly in the navy) are presently being revised (see study entitled "Social and legal aspects of the status of Gabonese women", March 1997);
- In the area of psychology, the many awareness-raising campaigns conducted have enabled women to combat their lack of confidence, their feelings of inferiority, and their fear of undertaking new ventures and of taking risks;
- In the social sphere, the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, with the collaboration of UNDP, has set up the Observatory for Women's Rights and Equality, whose primary objectives are:

– to identify all national and international legislation concerning women's rights;

– to collect data on equality in the various areas and record the most flagrant examples of violation;

– to report all discriminatory measures and actions;

– to propose the reforms or amendments necessary to ensure that laws and practices conform to the provisions of national and international legal instruments.

However, certain obstacles were identified in the studies conducted by the Ministry for the Family and the Advancement of Women. ("Results of the survey on women and decision-making", published with the collaboration of UNDP in July 2000). Such obstacles include backward thinking, women's lack of political education, and the absence of a sense of common purpose among women themselves.

Article 4
Special measures to accelerate equality between men and women

In order to accelerate the process of establishing equality between men and women, the Republic of Gabon has introduced a number of special measures aimed at women, and in particular:

- The appointment of women to positions of authority traditionally held exclusively by men (2 female army Generals, 5 female ministers, 1 female aeroplane pilot, 1 female Public Commissioner, and 1 female President of the Constitutional Court).
- Specific measures related to women's nature and their procreative function (maternity leave in addition to annual leave, the right to breastfeed, the prohibition of night work by women and work strenuous to women's health, etc.). If an employer fails to respect those rights, appeal may be made to the courts, or cases may be taken up by the National Commission for the Family and the Advancement of Women (Decree No. 298/PR/MFPF on the creation, powers, and functioning of the National Commission for the Family and the Advancement of Women, section 1, article 3).

Furthermore, the "Gabonese Recognition" medal is awarded each year to mothers of large families who are especially deserving (Decree No. 00562/PR of 31 May 1975) and to foster mothers (those who have no children of their own, but who have raised those of other women).

Article 5
Sex role stereotyping

There are a number of attitudes and cultural practices that represent genuine obstacles to the social advancement of Gabonese women. These include the levirate, the sororate, and the traditional division of labour, which all have the effect of placing women in a position of social inferiority.

The Gabonese Government, with the collaboration of UNDP and women's associations, therefore conducts awareness-raising programmes designed to make men and women aware of the need to combat such backward attitudes and practices.

The following measures are of particular note in this context:

- The organization of training seminars on gender issues at all levels (non-governmental organizations and women's associations, secretariats-general of the civil service, directors of private companies, members of Government, staff of the Office of the Vice-President, and the inter–ministerial unit charged with drafting the document on poverty-reduction strategies);
- Awareness-raising campaigns concerning women's role in society;
- The re-launching of "Femme Gabonaises", an informational magazine produced by the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women.

With regard to young people, boys and girls increasingly participate in virtually the same activities. In the schools, for example, all children take the same subjects and play the same sports.

With regard to employment training, article 17 of Act No. 5/78 of 1 June 1978, introducing the new Labour Code of the Republic of Gabon, states that: "All workers of either sex shall enjoy the same right of access to all agencies offering employment training and employment refresher courses". As a result, more and more young women have become aware of their intellectual capacities, and are able to take part in a range of training opportunities.

All parents are responsible for the care of their children, but this is especially true of mothers, since they appear to be much more attuned and attentive to children's needs.

Moreover, the Government of the Republic and non-governmental organizations run awareness-raising campaigns aimed at providing mothers and fathers with family life education. These campaigns are carried out through the media or through periodic meetings. Instruction is also provided on subjects such as family planning, budgeting, combating STD/AIDS, etc. In 1987, these awareness-raising activities were carried out in the junior and high schools of Libreville.

Acts of violence are penalized under the Penal Code. There is no law giving husbands the "right to punish" their wives, but in practice, it is hard for wives to report acts of violence inflicted upon them by their husbands.

A survey to be carried out on this subject will seek to determine the extent of such phenomena. Two films on violence are currently being produced, and a film about incest, entitled "The weight of silence", has already been produced.

In Gabon, the dowry is officially prohibited (Act No. 20 of 31 May 1963), but nonetheless remains very widespread, due to certain traditional beliefs – particularly the belief in its "symbolic" status – which tend to favour its preservation.

Women who are victims of sexual aggression are taken to hospital or directly to specialized services. The law provides severe punishment for the sexual abuse of children. Article 256 of the Penal Code stipulates that "anyone who commits rape shall be sentenced to five to 10 years' imprisonment. If the crime is committed against a child under 15, the offender shall be sentenced to hard labour for life".

Article 6
Suppression of prostitution and trafficking in women in all its forms

For a number of years, the Gabonese authorities have been confronted with the phenomenon of trafficking in children, including young girls, from West Africa.

It should be noted here that the Gabonese Penal Code prohibits slavery in all its forms (articles 260 et seq.).

Due to the re-emergence of the phenomenon of trafficking in children for labour exploitation, and in the wake of the Libreville subregional consultation on the development of strategies against the trafficking of children in western and central Africa, of February 2000, the Government has taken a number of steps to combat such trafficking. These measures are essentially aimed at creating an appropriate legal framework and at strengthening national capacities. In particular, they include the following:

- Ordinance No. 4/2001 of 14 August 2001 amending and supplementing certain provisions of the Penal Code, provides, in article 278a, paragraph 1, that

"anyone who organizes or facilitates the trafficking of children or who participates in or gains any advantage from such trafficking, particularly by transporting, introducing into the national territory, sheltering, selling, or illegally exploiting children, shall be sentenced to life in prison and a fine of between 10 and 20 million CFA francs ...".

Anyone who serves as an accomplice to, or plans such acts shall be sentenced to the same penalties as the main perpetrators, in accordance with the provisions of articles 6, 48 and 49 of the Penal Code, and shall not be granted any reprieve.

Offenders who are foreign nationals shall also be expelled from, and barred from residing in, the national territory, and offenders who are Gabonese nationals shall be stripped of their civic, civil and family rights.

Furthermore, the cost of repatriating the child shall be charged to the offenders, and the assets used in committing the facts and the proceeds of the activities shall be systematically seized for the benefit of the State.

- Implementation of the common platform of action against labour exploitation of children, in February 2000;
- Creation of an inter-ministerial commission charged with combating trafficking in children;
- Creation of a follow-up committee, which has already initiated several actions:

– Training seminars;

– Formulation of a draft cooperation agreement on the repatriation of child victims of trafficking in western and central Africa;

– Formulation of a draft law on slavery and trafficking in children, amending certain provisions of the Penal Code;

– Formulation of a draft decree to combat child labour, in application of article 177 of the Labour Code;

- Creation of a centre for the shelter and transit of abandoned children and children who are victims of trafficking, with a view to their repatriation.

With respect to prostitution, although it is of limited scope, it does, unfortunately, exist, due to the poverty and destitution of certain sectors of the population, and is a cause of many social ills, such as AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, drug use, etc.

No study has yet been conducted on this subject in order to evaluate the extent of the phenomenon and determine the measures to be taken.

It should be noted, however, that Gabonese law, as provided for in articles 260 et seq. of the Penal Code and as reinforced by Act No. 18/84, prohibits prostitution and procuring. Anyone who acts to protect or promote prostitution shall be sentenced to 6 months' to 2 years' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 1 million CFA francs.

Articles 230, 256, et seq. of the Penal Code prohibit all forms of violence against women, as well as any offence against public decency, regardless of age or social category.

Certain obstacles have been identified to the fight against trafficking in children, including girls:

- The porous nature of the country's borders;
- The resistance of those concerned;
- The difficulty of infiltrating trafficking networks.

Article 7
Participation in political and public life

The Gabonese Constitution guarantees equal political rights to citizens of either sex. Gabonese women have the right to vote, and are eligible, under the same conditions as men, to apply for all public agencies.

Women now participate actively at the highest public and private leadership levels, albeit to a degree that remains limited.

It is significant that only one woman has thus far been appointed to the post of provincial governor, and that the Republic of Gabon has not appointed any woman governor, prefect, or deputy prefect since 1993.

The following tables show historical changes in women's participation in the National Assembly, the Senate, and local institutions.

Table 1
Women in the National Assembly

Period	**Total**	*Men*	*Women*	*Percentage of women*
1980-1985	**93**	80	13	13.9
1985-1990	**120**	103	17	14.2
1990-1996	**120**	114	6	5
1996-2001	**120**	109	11	9.2

The rate of women's participation in the National Assembly thus follows trends observed in other areas. Their participation has never climbed beyond 14 per cent and, at 13.9 per cent and 14.2 per cent, was greater during the single-party years than during the years of the multiparty system (5 per cent and 9.2 per cent).

There were 1,142 candidates at the legislative elections of 1996. Eighty of the candidates were women, and 13.75 per cent of those women candidates were elected.

Table 2
Women in the Senate

Period	**Total**	*Men*	*Women*	*Percentage of women*
1996-2001	**91**	80	11	12

Women's rate of participation in the Senate provides confirmation, if it were necessary, of the under-representation of women in the institutions of the Republic.

The maximum 14 per cent participation achieved in one house of Parliament remains far from satisfactory in terms of enabling women to influence decision-making in any way.

Furthermore, the composition of certain decision-making institutions shows quite clearly that women tend to be marginalized with respect to the decision-making process.

Table 3
Women in National Assembly administration

Period	**Total members**	*Women*	*Percentage of women*
1985-1990	**16**	3	18.75
1990-1996	**21**	4	19
1996-2001	**21**	2	9.5

Table 4
Women in Senate administration

Period	**Total members**	*Women*	*Percentage of women*
1996-2001	**15**	2	13.33

With regard to the presence of women in local institutions, the statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior indicate that, at the 1996 elections, 61 women were elected to district councils and 174 women were elected to municipal councils (some were subsequently elected as mayors (Port Gentil, Lambaréné, Tchibanga, Mouila)). Sixty-nine women (8.8 per cent of the total) were elected to Departmental assemblies.

The Gabonese Government is aware of the efforts that must be made to increase women's participation in these institutions and is already engaged in that process. Indeed, it was for this reason that the Minister for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, with the collaboration of the United Nations Population Fund, created the Network of Gabonese Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, of which she is the President.

Article 8
Women's participation at the international level

Although women do participate regularly in the work of international institutions and at international conferences, their participation remains very low compared to that of men.

In this respect, Gabon has:

- 1 permanent woman representative to the United Nations;
- 2 non-permanent woman ambassadors and 2 itinerant woman ambassadors.

Women also participate in United Nations Assemblies and Conferences, as well as in other regional and international symposia.

The main obstacle in this context remains the requirement for married women to obtain their husbands' consent.

Article 9
Nationality

Act No. 37/98 of 20 July 1998, introducing the new Nationality Code, has been adopted. The Act includes innovations establishing equal rights for men and women. Gabonese nationality may be acquired by birth, filiation, recognition, naturalization, reintegration, or marriage.

The conditions for acquiring nationality are the same for men and women. The new Code is innovative in stipulating that a foreign man who marries a Gabonese woman may now acquire Gabonese nationality, at his express request, three years after the date of the marriage, provided that the said marriage has not been dissolved or declared null (articles 20 and 24 of the Nationality Code). The President of the Court in the place of residence concerned has the jurisdiction to decide in requests to acquire nationality on the grounds of birth, filiation, recognition, or marriage (article 38 of the Nationality Code).

Loss of nationality occurs in the same way for persons of either sex through renunciation (article 34 of the Nationality Code).

Gabonese women who marry non-nationals do not automatically lose their nationality (as was previously the case).

Nationality may be transferred by men or women.

In practice, however, there is a tendency to give greater weight to the father's nationality, due to ignorance of the law.

Article 10
Advancement of women in education

The Gabonese Constitution guarantees equal access to education for all children of either sex. Under Act No. 16/66 of 10 August 1966, schooling is mandatory for all children aged 6 to 16.

Scholarships are offered to girls under the same conditions as to boys (scholarships are awarded to any secondary-school student whose average grade is equal to, or above 10/20).

The Government has also set up training and education facilities for all children.

The attendance rate for girls is 100 per cent at the primary school level, 39.94 per cent at the junior high school level, 7.20 per cent at the upper high school level, and 2.63 per cent in higher education. Thus, the higher the level of study, the lower the proportion of female students.

This is because girls are faced with a range of problems, such as lack of parental responsibility, domestic duties, and early pregnancies. Nonetheless, some girls do manage to complete their studies.

The following table shows historical changes in the number of women graduating from the faculty of medicine.

Table 5
Graduates of the Gabonese Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences

Year	*Men*	*Women*	**Total**
1988	15	14	**29**
1989	14	10	**24**
1991	7	3	**10**
1992	12	14	**26**
1993	8	6	**14**
1994	10	9	**19**
1995	11	4	**15**
1996	15	11	**26**
1997	6	3	**9**
1998	5	3	**8**
1999	5	19	**24**
2000	8	8	**16**
2001	23	16	**39**

Other measures have been introduced:

- By the Government:
  - In 1998, Organization of a national conference on the Baccalaureate;
  - In 2000, national symposium on grade repetition;
  - Creation, in 2001, of a project aimed at retaining young mothers in schools, or reintegrating them into schools;
  - Construction of a nursery centre for the children of poor young mothers;
  - Training of women community educators, focusing in particular on infant care in rural areas;
  - Creation of women's centres providing training in various disciplines.
- By civil society:
  - Survey on school dropout rates among girls (Gabonese Association of Women Educators, 1997);
  - Campaign to raise awareness of the importance of school (Gabonese Association of Women Educators).

The following table shows literacy rates by age group and sex:

Table 6
Literate population

Age group	*Men*	*Women*	**Total**
15-19	45 692	47 348	**93 040**
20-24	35 059	42 770	**81 829**
25-29	34 722	35 501	**70 223**
30-34	38 868	27 748	**58 616**
35-39	24 077	18 094	**42 171**
40-44	17 810	10 263	**28 073**
45-49	12 315	5 266	**17 581**
50-54	8 181	2 743	**10 924**
55-59	6 156	1 570	**7 726**
60-64	3 256	745	**4 001**
65+	3 429	1 118	**4 547**

Source: 1993 General Census of Population and Housing.

In the 15 to 49 age group, 80 per cent of the population can read and write. The literacy rate among women in the same age group is 64 per cent, but the rate is lower in the 50 to 65 age group because, as girls grow older, there seems to be less insistence upon sending them to school, due to the influence of sociocultural constraints.

With respect to educational and vocational guidance, there is no discrimination, as only aptitudes and skills are taken into account. However, it should be noted that girls rarely choose careers in science.

Article 11
Advancement of women in employment

In Gabon there is no discrimination against women in matters of employment. Even the status of women employed in the security forces, which was discriminatory, is currently being completely revised.

The following laws guarantee equal employment rights for men and women:

- Constitution of the Republic of Gabon (Act No. 14/2000 of 11 October 2000), article 1, paragraph 7;
- Act No. 18/93 of 13 September 1993 on the general statutes of the civil service;
- Act No. 8/91 of 26 September 1991 on the general statutes of civil servants;
- Act No. 3/94 of 21 September 1994 on the Labour Code;
- Order No. 001/95 on the orientations of health policy in the Republic of Gabon;
- Act No. 4 /96 of 11 March 1996 establishing the State pensions system;
- Act No. 15/72 of 29/72 on the first part of the Civil Code (article 261).

In practice, however, employers prefer to hire men for certain positions requiring consistent attendance and physical strength, because this protects them against women's absences due to maternity leave.

Furthermore, article 50 of the general statutes of the civil service states that, subject to departmental requirements, and subject to the relevant provisions in the statutes of the various civil service corps, competitive entry examinations shall be held on an annual basis.

Article 51 of the same statutes provides that, subject to departmental requirements, the State shall provide training for permanent or experienced officers who meet the conditions set forth in the relevant legislation (see Labour Code, articles 98 and 99).

Wage levels are calculated on the basis of qualifications and performance. The base wage is the same for all workers in the public and private sectors, regardless of their origin, political beliefs, or age (article 140 of the Labour Code).

In general terms, the social benefits available to employees are:

- Family benefits, including family allowances, the new child allowance, and maternity benefits;
- Medical care;
- Old age and disability benefits;
- Single-income family allowance;
- Education allowance;
- Paid leave.

The mandatory retirement age is 55 for men and women. However, the retirement age does vary in the case of certain military corps, depending on rank. There is no standard voluntary retirement age for men and women. However, after completing minimum service of 15 to 20 years, public or private officials may be allowed to retire on a voluntary basis.

In the same way, the specific statutes of certain corps may set a higher retirement age, due to their specific circumstances, but may not in any case set it higher than 65. These corps are the following:

- Magistrates;
- Physicians;
- Pharmacists;
- Higher education teachers and graduate researchers;
- Monitoring and inspection corps (Article 114 of the general statutes of civil servants).

Moreover, with respect both to pension contributions paid as part of standard deductions and to employers' deductions from staff members' basic pay, men and women contribute on an equal basis.

Gabon does have social security legislation, but it does not cover all women (only those who are employed or whose husbands are employed).

Spouses benefit only partially from retirement benefits following the death of their spouse.

Under article 170 of the Labour Code, women may not be dismissed due to pregnancy or maternity leave.

Any dismissal of a pregnant woman whose condition has been medically confirmed or any dismissal that occurs in the 15 months following the birth must be authorized by the inspector of labour.

The provisions introduced with regard to maternity leave are set out in article 173 of the Labour Code: "During their maternity leave, women have the right to free medical care and to the entire wage they were earning when their work was suspended and to benefits payable by the National Social Security Fund. They also retain the right to receive benefits in kind". Furthermore, Act No. 12/2000 provides for two hours of breastfeeding per day during the first six months and one hour per day during the second six months. During this period, mothers may quit their jobs definitively, without prior notice, and without being required to pay compensation for breach of contract.

Parental leave is governed by the aforementioned laws, in all sectors of activity (public and private, civil and military).

Gabon has introduced provisions regarding paid leave, which is offered on the same basis to men and women employees. Article 188 of the Labour Code states: "Employers shall pay the employee, throughout his or her period of leave, an allowance at least equal to the average value of wages, benefits, allowances and commissions paid to the employee during the 12 months prior to his or her departure on leave." Article 59 of the general statutes of the civil service states: "Public employees are entitled to paid leave under the terms set out in the law". Arrangements for leave of public employees are the responsibility of each separate administration.

With regard to health and safety at work, Gabon has adopted the following laws and regulations:

- Act No. 3/94 on the Labour Code (article 172) gives women the opportunity to change their job or position if, in the opinion of their physician, their delivery has caused a complication precluding them from performing their usual tasks. This change shall be temporary, for a period of three months following delivery or following return from maternity leave;
- Act 1/2000 of 18 August 2000, defining certain general measures for the health and social protection of women, mothers and children;
- Legal provisions to ensure special protection.

There are laws that provide special protection for women during pregnancy in the case of work which has been shown to be harmful to them. Article 172 of the Labour Code states: "during her pregnancy and 15 months after her delivery, a woman who is usually employed in a job recognized as hazardous to health or who produces a medical certificate attesting that a change in the nature of her work is necessary in the interests of her health or that of her child, has the right to be transferred, without reduction in pay, to another position that is not hazardous to her health."

Moreover, night work is strictly prohibited for children under 18 and women, as is mining work (articles 159 to 167 of the Labour Code).

There are public nurseries, as well as a number of private nurseries. They are open to all women, but primarily to those who are in employment.

Many offences, such as sexual harassment and trafficking in children, which did not formerly exist, are being considered by the National Assembly with a view to their inclusion in the Gabonese Penal Code.

Article 12
Equality in the health sector

There is no discrimination against women in the area of health care. Moreover, special services have been set up for women in an effort to meet their specific pathologies and needs. These services include:

- Maternal and infant health care centres;
- Gynaecological and obstetric services, etc.

Medical services provided for women during pregnancy and after delivery are not free of charge. These services include:

- Purchase of medicines and health card, prenatal check-up, and ultrasound.

The Gabonese State is making efforts to provide prenatal monitoring by health care workers (gynaecologists, obstetricians, midwives, male and female nurses ...), organizing sessions in nutritional education for pregnant or breastfeeding women.

The main causes of female morbidity and mortality are:

Mortality:

- Haemorrhages;
- Induced abortion;
- Cancer;
- Infections;
- HIV/AIDS.

Morbidity:

- Parasitic diseases (malaria, filariasis);
- Nutritional and iron-deficiency anaemia;
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STD);

The maternal mortality rate is 519 per 100,000 live births (Source: Gabon 2000 Demographic and Health Survey).

The infant mortality rate is 57.3 per 1,000 (Gabon 2000 Demographic and Health Survey).

The juvenile mortality rate is 33.2 per 1,000 (Gabon 2000 Demographic and Health Survey).

The main causes of infant mortality are:

- Acute respiratory infections;
- Diarrhoea complications;
- The six infectious diseases;
- Malaria.

The main causes of morbidity and mortality are the same for girls and boys:

- Malaria;
- Intestinal parasitosis;
- Sickle-cell anaemia;
- Nutritional anaemia;
- Infections;
- Malnutrition.

Average life expectancy is 54 for women and 53 for men.

The global birth rate is 33.1 per 1,000 (Gabon 2000 Demographic and Health Survey).

In urban areas, the percentage of women who receive prenatal care is 95.1 per cent.

The average number of live births per woman is 4.3.

The unmet need for contraception is 35.6 per cent for the country overall and 14.3 per cent for the country's major cities (Libreville and Port-Gentil).

The contraception prevalence rate (CPR) of modern methods is 11.8 per cent.

Gabon has a pro-birth policy, because of its low population.

The introduction of the "Gabonese Recognition" medal, which is awarded each year to mothers of large families and foster mothers, is an example of this policy.

However, the child allowance added to the father's or mother's wages should be increased, and the unemployed mothers' allowance reinstated.

Women's access to family planning services is hampered by the cultural belief that the child is a precious gift who perpetuates the family and the clan.

Women make up 55.17 per cent of all health sector staff (Ministry of Health, 1986).

Gabon also has traditional practitioners, who have their own association.

On 18 August 2000, Ordinance No. 64/69 of 4 October 1969 was repealed. It had stipulated that women must receive their husbands' permission before receiving family planning services and had outlawed contraception. This had resulted in backstreet abortions and their complications (death of the mother; sterility). Gabonese women are now free to plan the births of their children.

However, despite the liberalization of contraception, abortion does exist. Articles 244 and 245 of the Penal Code impose a prison sentence of one to five

years upon any medical worker or other individual who, through food, potions, medicines, manoeuvres, violence, or any other means, procures or attempts to procure the abortion of a woman who is pregnant or thought to be pregnant, whether she has consented or not.

This penalty is accompanied by a fine ranging from 24,000 to 500,000 CFA francs.

The penalty may be increased by between 5 and 10 years, and the fine raised to between 50,000 and 1 million CFA francs, if it is determined that the offender voluntarily engaged in such activity. Any woman who procures, or attempts to procure an abortion for herself shall also be sentenced to 6 months to 2 years' imprisonment and a fine ranging from 24,000 to 240,000 CFA francs, or either of the two penalties.

However, if the mother's health is in danger, therapeutic abortion may be performed.

Induced abortions are not covered by social security. These measures apply in the same way to women living in rural areas as they do for urban women.

Prenatal tests do exist, but they are very expensive, as in the case of medical staff who perform a therapeutic abortion in order to save the mother's life. In 1992, 28 per cent of maternal deaths at the Libreville Hospital were due to abortion.

There is scarcely any voluntary sterilization. Women from a certain social category prefer to use an intra-uterine device (IUD) in order to increase the intervals between deliveries.

The State has introduced the national programme to combat AIDS, which includes a component on STD. The main activity of the programme is to educate people and raise their awareness of the risks and effects of the disease.

Also, a national plan of action to combat AIDS has been formulated, an outpatient treatment has been set up (in 2001), and the President of the Republic and Head of State has set up an assistance fund for people suffering from AIDS or living with HIV.

Female contraceptives are distributed to women on an experimental basis.

We should also note that there are a number of associations involved in combating AIDS: the Society for Women and Aids in Africa (SWAA), whose Gabonese branch is the African Women's AIDS Association (AFAFSI); the young people's reproductive health network, Sida zéro, and other Christian groups.

Article 13
Economic and social benefits

There are two social welfare agencies in Gabon:

- National Security Social Fund (Act No. 6/75 of 25 November 1975 instituting the Social Security Code);
- National Pensions Fund (Act No. 010/84 of 24 January 1982 instituting the Social Pensions Code.

The family and social benefits of civil servants are paid out of public revenues.

The aforementioned agencies all provide the following family benefits to all members, regardless of sex:

- Family allowances;
- Prenatal allowances;
- Education allowance;
- Maternity benefits.

In the case of the National Social Security Fund (CNSS), the right to family benefits is given to fund members, whether male or female, who are actively employed and have worked for four consecutive months with one or more employers.

In the case of the Pensions Fund, the right to family allowances is given to all the different categories of fund members, including:

- Contracted State officials;
- Freelance workers;
- The poor.

With regard to commercial or development banks, there is no sex discrimination. The same conditions apply to all, both men and women.

The right to bank loans and mortgages is recognized for all natural or legal persons, male or female, who have attained the age of majority, meet the requirements of sound mental health and good character, and have a bank account and a regular income.

Certain backward attitudes do persist, however, with respect to married women who apply for loans. Such attitudes are generally expressed by individual banking officials acting on their own initiative.

Women wage-earners who have a bank account and a regular income do not require authorization from a third party to qualify for a loan, except in the following cases:

- Whenever security is required. Clients (whether male or female) who request loans must provide a guarantee or endorsement;
- In the case of a joint account. If the wife requests a loan, the husband must stand security.

With respect to qualification for mortgage loans, level of income is again the only consideration. Mortgage security is based on land (for building) or physical property (for example, buildings to be renovated). It should perhaps be stressed, however, that only very few women can meet the aforementioned conditions for credit access.

Other mechanisms, both formal and informal, have been set up to provide women with access to financial resources:

1. Annuity fund groups;

2. The prize of the President of the Republic, which was set up to encourage women to develop profitable economic activities (for details, contact Ministry for the Family);

3. The Savings and Loan Fund (CECAG), which was set up by the Gabonese Association of Social Service Workers (AGASS) to help rural women gain access to structured savings and loans denied to them by local banks. CECAG was set up in 1998 and currently has 120 members.

4. The signing of an agreement between the Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women, and UNDP on a pilot project to award microcredits designed to encourage women in the province of Nyanga to become independent.

Because conditions of access to loans are the same for women and men, there have been no reported instances of unfair treatment of women.

The genuine participation of women in official sporting activities (those defined by specific regulations) dates back to 1960, the year in which Gabon gained independence.

Over the years, many Gabonese sportswomen have won trophies at pan-African and world competitions, as well as in athletics, basketball, handball and judo (one woman has on several occasions won the African judo championship and runner-up in the Africa military games).

With respect to physical and sporting education, some women have distinguished themselves in training and instructional positions within the national sports system, as the following table shows:

Position	*Women*	*Men*
Youth and sport inspectors	2	39
Certified physical education instructors	3	73
Assistant physcial education instructors	1	42
Physical education counsellors	4	8
Sports counsellors	2	15
Physical education teachers	6	97
Level III trainers	3	/
Technical Directors	1	12
Federation Presidents	1	16

There are some women in positions of administrative responsibility at the Ministry of Sport:

- 1 Deputy Secretary General;
- 1 Director General;
- 1 Director;
- 1 Head of Department.

There is no discrimination in the laws and regulations governing sport in Gabon. However, it is certainly true that more funding is available for men's sports than for women's sports.

In general, the influence of certain sociocultural constraints makes it hard for women to participate in sport in significant numbers. Women's sports should be promoted through efforts to enhance the image of women and sport in the media.

Furthermore, the number of women on the executive and administrative bodies of sports organizations should be increased.

Article 14
Particular problems faced by rural women

Rural women make up 27.64 per cent of Gabon's female population. They live in difficult and precarious conditions. This is because rural areas are cut off and isolated by poor roads and inadequate social, health and cultural facilities. This limits their activities (primarily agricultural production and small businesses).

Production activities:

Production activities are mostly agricultural.

Legally, the status of rural women is no different from that of women living in urban areas.

Rural women may thus own building land in the city itself or in urban areas by fulfilling the conditions set by the land records office.

When women marry, and for as long as the marriage lasts, they have easy access to land belonging to their husbands' families and perform their agricultural labour without difficulty, even though they are not landowners. In the event of divorce, however, they must return to their families without being able to take with them or claim ownership of the product of such agricultural labour.

Food-processing activities:

These are insignificant, due to:

- The uncertain nature of food-processing techniques and the rudimentary nature of the available tools;
- The lack of supervision and training;
- Low incomes.

In general, processed products are consumed by the people themselves, rather than being sold.

Marketing:

Because there are very few markets in rural areas, products are sold in makeshift markets, at roadsides, or outside farms.

Access to credit:

Rural areas lack banking facilities, with the closest banks often lying some 200 km away. Moreover, because of their low incomes, women are excluded from the classic banking system and are not guaranteed access to loans.

Literacy:

Very few rural women are literate. Rural women account for 15 per cent of the total 60.5 per cent literacy rate for the female population as a whole (15-39 age group).

The Ministry for the Family, the Protection of Children and the Advancement of Women has undertaken an extensive literacy programme, which is provided through provincial health care services. Among the programme's components are the provision of community educators responsible for the care of young children in rural areas, literacy programmes, and efforts to sensitize people to community problems.

The programme began in February 2002 with the training of around 20 community educators. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is the Ministry's main partner in this initiative.

Health care:

Although Gabon's health care infrastructure is extremely developed overall, rural women do not have access to quality health care. The distribution of equipment and personnel is unequal, and does not reflect demand among the population. Seventy-six per cent of public health doctors work in the country's major urban centres (Libreville and Port–Gentil) and the remaining 24 per cent in the rest of the country.

Sanitation:

In rural areas, sanitation problems lead to many diseases. Most problems concern the construction of latrines and the supply of drinking water.

Women are responsible for supplying, collecting, transporting, managing, preserving and distributing water. As a result of the village water-supply programme launched in 1976, it has been possible to meet 40 per cent of the drinking-water needs of the rural population, in three of Gabon's nine provinces. The programme is now being extended to the remaining six provinces.

Furthermore, maintenance of pumps by the people is not effective, because there is no provision for ongoing follow-up and training.

The State is aware of the many problems faced by rural women, and has taken a number of measures on their behalf, through development projects and programmes.

The following measures are of particular note:

- Formulation and adoption, in 2001, of laws regulating microfinance in the central African region, an essential step for the creation of a microfinance system that is better able to provide loans for rural women;
- Formulation, in 2000, together with civil society, of a national plan on poverty reduction strategies with a particular focus on destitute and vulnerable population groups, and especially in the areas of training and supervision;
- Adoption in June 1999 of a concrete plan of action for Gabonese women, focusing on the training of traditional midwives and the creation of a support fund to finance productive activities;
- Creation of an annual presidential prize, which helps to promote the socio-economic activities of women, and particularly rural women;
- The formulation and adoption of Act No. 01/2000 on the social and health protection of women, children and the girl child. In addition to State interventions, the activities of some non-governmental organizations among rural women, in the form of training, instruction and microcredit projects, are also worthy of mention.

Despite the State's efforts to improve the living conditions of rural women, difficulties do persist. In particular:

- The lack of training and supervision needed to make their activities profitable;
- Poor road transportation infrastructures. This makes the selling of products difficult, since this is a process that depends on intermediaries;
- With respect to land, the law makes no particular provision for the concerns of rural women. Access to land is a problem that merits particular attention.

In view of this situation, the State is planning to take significant measures on behalf of rural women, and in particular:

The creation of literacy centres, combined with campaigns aimed at sensitizing women about the need to become literate;

The creation of centres for training in and monitoring the socio-economic activities of women, focusing in particular on the techniques and technologies of microfinance businesses;

The development of microfinance businesses;

Continuation of the programme to improve the road network, including rural tracks;

Implementation of the national housing plan, launched in 1983, which calls for regular production of building land and reforms the system of providing assistance and funding for social housing.

Article 15
Equality in civil law

In Gabon, men and women are equal before the law.

The administration of assets is regulated by the Civil Code. Single women and men administer their own assets.

In the case of the married couple, the marital regime determines the administration of assets. Under the regime of the separation of assets, each spouse is responsible for administering his or her own assets. Under the joint estate regime, the husband is the administrator.

The same is true with respect to the conclusion of contracts.

In practice, however, the law is often misinterpreted, and frustrated by traditional thinking.

Examples:

- Some banks require that a wife obtain her husband's permission before opening an account, even though the law requires merely that the husband be notified (article 257, paragraph 2 of the Civil Code);
- The National Office for Documentation and Immigration requires that the husband give his permission should his wife wish to apply for, extend, or renew her passport, or if she wishes to travel;
- Harassment and other injustices suffered by widows and orphans at the hands of the families of deceased husbands and fathers.

With regard to choice of residence, article 254 states that the husband must choose the family residence; that the wife is obliged to live with him; and that he must provide for her. Only when the residence chosen by the husband presents physical or psychological danger to the family may the court authorize the wife to live elsewhere with her children.

Article 16
Elimination of discrimination in marriage

Article 1, paragraph 14 of the Gabonese Constitution defines the family as the basic natural unit of society, and defines marriage as its legitimate support.

According to articles 78 and 80 of the Civil Code, regulating family relations, the individual citizen is subject to the law from birth until death, and may enjoy and exercise all private rights, unless there is a provision to the contrary. Any limitation imposed on the exercise of those rights and freedoms shall be regarded as null, unless justified by compelling social interest.

However, family life and marriage are strongly influenced by stereotypes and common misconceptions about women.

Consent to marriage and freedom of choice for the spouse

Article 198 of the Civil Code requires the mutual acceptance of marriage vows. Article 202 states that no action may be taken to force the fiancé or fiancée into marriage against his or her will.

Article 211 provides that each spouse must personally consent to the marriage during the marriage ceremony itself. Such consent shall not be considered valid if tainted by illegal actions. However, an exception is made in the case of the mentally unsound (article 204) and persons under 21 years of age. In such cases the legally responsible adult in question must either give or refuse consent for the marriage.

Furthermore, any attempt to force either spouse into marriage is formally prohibited by article 264 of the Penal Code, which states that anyone who, in a traditional ceremony, gives away or marries a girl against her will, or who gives away or marries a girl under 15 years of age, shall be sentenced to between one and five years' imprisonment. Under article 265 of the Code, whoever attempts to consummate such a forced marriage with a child under 15 years of age shall be sentenced to between one and 10 years in prison.

Formerly, all marriages effectively represented the official confirmation of a prior family arrangement. The consent of the young woman was thus sometimes tainted by the influence of the parents, who would oblige her to marry, for their own personal reasons.

Nowadays, however, marriages arranged by the spouses tend to be more common than those arranged by the families. The choice of partner now tends to be made by the spouses themselves, who inform their families only after they have made their choice.

Minimum age for marriage

Article 203 of the Civil Code establishes the minimum age for marriage at 15 for young women and 18 for young men. However, article 492 of the Civil Code establishes the age of majority at 21 for men and women.

Equal rights during marriage and at its dissolution

(a) During marriage

The Civil Code defines spouses' mutual rights and obligations, stating that spouses owe each other mutual fidelity, aid and assistance (Article 252, paragraph 2). Wives must work with their husbands to provide psychological and material guidance to the family and its property, raise the children, and make provisions for the children's future lives (article 253, paragraph 2). Neither spouse may independently control the rights governing the family accommodation (article 254, paragraph 3). The principle of mutual responsibility also applies to commitments made by the spouses for the upkeep of the household and the education of the children, but not in the case of manifestly excessive spending or impulsive purchases that have not been agreed by both spouses.

However, the Civil Code also includes certain inconsistencies that violate the principle of the equality of the spouses. Article 232 of the Code recognizes the option of polygamy, which in daily life produces many equalities in the treatment of co-spouses. Paragraph 4 of the article defines polygamy as the marital system of common law, in stating that the marriage shall be regarded as polygamous if the registrar neglects to ensure that the chosen option is explicitly stated during the marriage ceremony.

By marrying, a woman makes a commitment to obey her husband (Article 252 of the Civil Code), who is empowered as the head of the family (article 253). The husband thus decides on the domicile (articles 114 and 254) where the wife is obliged to live and where the husband is obliged to provide for her, for the duration of the marriage. The wife may avoid this arrangement only through court authorization. It should be noted that a married woman who abandons the marital home is penalized under penalties prohibiting adultery (Article 269 of the Penal Code). Thus, no matter how urgent the situation, the wife is forced to engage in a long and costly procedure in order to escape any violent situation to which she may be subject.

However, article 271, paragraph 2 of the Penal Code penalizes any husband who, without compelling grounds, voluntarily abandons his wife in the knowledge that she is pregnant. It follows, of course, that the husband may be absolved if he was not aware of his wife's pregnancy.

A woman may not enter into a second marriage until the first marriage has been dissolved. The same is true for the husband who is married under the option of monogamy. Failure to respect these rules is punishable by a prison sentence of 6 months to 3 years. However, under the provisions of article 178, husbands may refuse the option of monogamy during marriage. This provision in fact concerns only men, who are thus permitted to practise polygamy and to avoid the penalties set forth in the law by invoking article 270 of the Penal Code, which permits them to claim that there is a polygamous arrangement in place, authorized by traditional law. And yet, traditional marriage is not recognized under Gabonese law.

Nowadays, young couples appear to be increasingly responsible for their own marital affairs, despite the resistance of their parents, who have always tended to interfere in young couples' lives, even after their marriage.

Any separation of husband and wife must be declared by the courts. If the wife is renounced by the family, she is freed from her duties of cohabitation and her duty to obey. Separation of assets becomes effective on the day of the said declaration, in accordance with article 265 of the Civil Code.

In practice, however, the courts do not seem to apply this provision correctly, since it is used to penalize the renounced wife for adultery and for abandoning the marital home.

(b) At the dissolution of the marriage (article 264)

Marriage is dissolved through:

- The death of one of the spouses;
- Divorce
- Court declaration of absence.

The death of one of the spouses brings the dissolution of the marriage. The surviving spouse is no longer bound by the obligations of the marriage, which thenceforth become groundless. The surviving spouse is thus free to remake his or her life. However this freedom is not absolute in the case of the widow, whose rights of inheritance are limited.

The widow loses the possibility of supporting herself by means of the inheritance if there is acknowledged cohabitation. Moreover, article 264, in providing that one of the causes of the dissolution of the marriage is decease, contradicts article 692 of the Code, which provides that a wife shall be denied her right of usufruct if she remarries outside the family without good reason or if there is no proven right of inheritance by the widow. Inheritance rules are thus inconsistent, in making a certain number of concessions to tradition and custom.

According to articles 264 and 266 of the Civil Code, divorce may be granted only if there has been an act of transgression, and especially adultery, which is an offence punishable by the penalties set forth in articles 267 to 271 and 274 of the Penal Code. Breach of the commitment to the option of monogamy may also be regarded as grounds for divorce.

Divorce by mutual consent does not exist in Gabonese law. Once the court has declared the husband absent and the relevant proceedings have been completed, the marriage shall be regarded as dissolved.

Equal rights regarding procreation

In marriage, the issues of filiation, the name given to the children, and parental authority are governed by articles 391 to 396 of the Civil Code. The Gabonese Civil Code embraces the principle of child protection. In this regard, it may be said that Gabonese law is strongly marked by a spirit of equality, as long as the child is recognized as a legitimate or acknowledged child. The law goes even further in stipulating that the father of the child born following renunciation – which is forbidden – is the legal husband of its mother.

In case of divorce, care of the children is awarded to the person who can best meet the children's needs.

Equality in the choice of paternal name and profession

According to article 98 of the Civil Code, married women retain their paternal name. However, they may also take their husband's name or add it to their own. The death of the spouse does not deprive the wife of the right to take the name of the deceased or to add his name to her own, except in the event of remarriage.

In reality, wives habitually take the name of their husbands without any pressure being exerted on them.

Legitimate or natural children recognized by their natural fathers take their father's name, or a name given by him.

According to article 261 of the Civil Code, a woman may exercise the profession of her choice. And yet, although the husband may ask the court to prohibit her from doing so in the interest of the family, the wife may not do the same in return.

Equality regarding property and the administration and disposal of assets

Since 1989, the prevailing legal regime has been the separation of assets. When the spouses' assets are separated, each retains the right to administer, enjoy, and freely dispose of his or her personal assets. Each is responsible only for any debts he or she may have incurred before or during the marriage.

However, the spouses may choose the joint estate regime. In this case, the husband alone administers the estate, in accordance with article 335 of the Civil Code, unless he acknowledges having committed acts of transgression during his administration. In practice, however, it is hard to monitor compliance with this provision.

Conclusion

As the present report has indicated, since 1988, when Gabon submitted its initial report, the situation of Gabonese women has improved, in the sense that today most Gabonese women have become aware of their role and place in society.

The many awareness-raising campaigns and information seminars on gender have helped to awaken men and women to the need to advance the rights of women, who are the mainstay of society, without whom any sustainable development would be impossible.

At the instigation of the President of the Republic and Head of State, the Gabonese Government has introduced legal measures to eliminate the legal discrimination formerly suffered by women, in the spirit of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The improvement in the situation of Gabonese women would not have occurred so rapidly without the personal commitment of the President of the Republic and Head of State. We may cite, by way of example, his many statements against certain injustices inflicted upon women, particularly the treatment of widows and orphans in certain families. In his most recent speech to the nation, on Independence Day, he vigorously denounced these injustices and threatened reprisals against their perpetrators.

The President also introduced the National Day of Gabonese Women, which has been held on 17 April every year since 1998.

Studies have also been carried out and institutions set up to ensure the effective application of all the measures introduced. This is the case in particular with the National Commission for the Family and the Advancement of Women, the Observatory for Women's Rights and Equality, and the inter-ministerial commission charged with reviewing all legislation discriminating against women.

However, the Republic of Gabon is aware that constant efforts must be made with respect to:

- sensitization of the people, which must reach all sectors of society;
- participation of women in decision-making positions at all levels;
- attitudes that continue to be dictated by negative sociocultural constraints, which hamper progress toward the advancement of women.

Government efforts and the mobilization of civil society to advance women's rights already show the promise of a better future, in which all men and women can develop fully, in a spirit of mutual responsibility and harmony.

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